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LEAFLET
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FRANCES L. WARNER, NEWTON HIGH SCHOOL

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THE DIVISION OF OUR ENGLISH STAFF:
COMPOSITION TEACHERS AND
LITERATURE TEACHERS

Inasmuch as some educators are contending that in an age of specialization it is unwise to assign to English teachers work so distinct in character as the teaching of composition and the teaching of literature, the editor has assumed that members of the Association would be glad to hear a frank discussion of the advantages and the disadvantages of such a separation. Knowing that on this question Mrs. Jennie I. Ware, of the Roxbury High School, and Miss Frances L. Warner, of the Newton High School held divergent views, he solicited the following contributions. Mrs. Ware presents the advantages of such a division; Miss Warner presents the disadvantages. The members of the Association are the jurors in the case.

THE EDITOR.

THE ADVANTAGES OF SEPARATION

When my long-time friend and I begin to talk of the past, her daughters remark, "Rummynuisances again!" The discussion resulting from Mr. Bok's apparent discovery that our college-graduates are not acquiring an orderly, inspiring, and usable knowledge of their native language has brought to me a train of reminiscences from several years' teaching in a city high school numbering a thousand boys and girls.

I remember the advent of the child christened, "Write,

write, write"—first name, "A few lines each day"—middle name, and "Rhetoric-composition"—surname. A new teacher, a college-graduate, introduced the exposition and practice of the latest remedy for failure in self-expression. "Yes," she said, "even if you cannot correct, but must put the papers in the waste-basket."

Now, regardless of her special subject, each room-teacher had been spending one hour each week with her room-class in "rhetoricals." American literature had afforded a source-book for suggestive thought, and for form as evolved from certain grammatical and rhetorical necessities of expression. At least once a month, each member of the room-class wrote a composition—an essay—long enough to demand an introduction, a development, and a concluding. Thus the room-teacher had guided the rise and the expression of creative thought upon subjects possessing both current and permanent interest. At the same time, from the pupil's viewpoint, the teacher had not taught him "English," to be read and to be written by machine-made rules for producing a definite sum-total, as does an adding machine; nor was she to him the "English teacher", who had to magnify her office: she was just a teacher working out with her class the answers to questions suggested by the reading, a something pleasurable as work.

We, the teachers, thought that we had some measure of success in teaching composition, and, on occasion, this hope was confirmed by comments of college professors reported to us by returning students.

There were the regular courses in literature reciting four times a week, and classes in rhetoric, two or more periods a week, during the junior and sophomore years; but, in no instance were the teachers of the literature and rhetoric identical. These teachers coöperated, and the teachers of all subjects took for granted that all recitations and tests, oral and written, should possess a reasonable degree of grammatical accuracy, and of clearness. All recitations and compositions were for a purpose immediate and genuine—to express true-blue thought,—not to talk, or to write, "English".

I am convinced that, with the individual pupil, our purpose more nearly reached its accomplishment thus, than it did when we gave up "rhetoricals", and when all the subsequent teachers of English taught both literature and composition in the same class.

Yet this result was not because the teachers in either case were better or worse. The pupil absorbs much of his men-

tal content from externals; therefore, because of the presence and personality of a different teacher, he realized unconsciously the indivisibility of literature and composition, of thought and expression as interdependent—and also the individual aspect of each, and the consequent different method of approach and of comprehension. In the classroom “rhetoricals”, his experience with a third teacher was a putting into practice of the science studied with the other two.

As I have watched the rapid growth of the composition-child, oftentimes nurtured by a teacher seemingly regardless that thought must precede any expression worth while, I have wondered that such result as Mr. Bok seems to have found was not sooner self-revealing. If there is deterioration in the product, is it because this rapid growth has transformed, in the ears of some, the demand for teachers of ‘English’ into the demand for teachers of composition alone? If so, are we not forgetting that the interpretation of expressed thought, and the inspiration to thought, is not only a character-making source, but also the basis of composition?

“But one phase of the perennial catastrophe” I read, “is pointedly suggested by the following letter from a professor of English in a leading University: ‘What we want in this institution is men who will teach English composition to Freshman classes all the rest of their lives, and never weary of it. The present instructors expect after a few years to be promoted to the teachings of literature.’” If the professor of English had but reversed his phrases, so that the last would have been, “promoted to the teaching of composition,” how much less misleading to the college graduate that might be hoping to teach in a high school! She seeks her work; the demand is for teachers of “English”; excellent manuals of rhetoric-composition are abounding and re-abounding; she can follow those—assign a lesson, read it, and hear it recited; she gets a position; she will be expected, probably, to teach both literature and composition, regardless of natural fitness, or of choice. She may succeed, but the chances point to mediocre work from her and from her class. How much more fruitful for pupil and teacher if the latter might follow the line of her choice and of adaptability in either literature or composition, and therefore, of least resistance and of pleasure!

This last advantage is to be noted especially when the large number of schools in one system necessitates, for the

sake of uniformity, the prescribing of periods for literature and composition, at stated times in each week, conducted by the same teacher. And here we digress somewhat to try to show that however advantageous to uniformity of procedure among the schools, or however helpful to the neophyte in teaching, it is hazardous to cramp the teacher of literature by thus rigidly prescribing.

The ever first demand of the present is for efficiency in men and women in all walks in life, efficiency to be attained by training the boys and girls in industrial, vocational, and commercial schools, and in schools of practical and mechanical arts. Again, I read: "In the most commonplace things of everyday life, we find the stuff on which to test our reasoning about life, our theories as to success and failure, our plans to improve the conditions of existence. "Reasoning"—"theories"—"plans"; such come only out of visions, and visions come only out of thought,—and thought comes? Does thought come out of the manual of composition? Out of the unused brain? Does the spider unroll his web, or does he spin it? And when the boy, "reading" in any sort of school, can respond to the men of vision, to the poets, the prophets, the inventors, as they have illumined with the light that never was on sea or land the commonplace things, and the lives of the everyday of the past and the present, then he may become practical, and can test his reasoning about life. For all the boys and the girls do in some fashion reason about life. Here, then, the teacher of literature may do the basal work in English, the beginning to think, by the study of some greater vision; may induce the clear thinking, which, we are told, fit expression pre-supposes.

Moreover, some of us believe that, "Finally, and perhaps above all, in the teaching of English, we should aim to inspire our pupils with a genuine love for reading of the better class, and a desire to continue such reading after their school days are over."

To bring to the birth all these purposeful endeavors, the teacher of literature must be somewhat of an opportunist; hence she is hindered, at least, if she must be always observant of rules for times and seasons. For, in spite of the fact that she has registered mentally her own visions for the day's work, each recitation may require swift re-adjustment of plans, by pupils' failures or questions, if, through the text, she would summon into action the dormant reaches of the human souls before her. She can make no absolute measures of the delicacy and variety of the movement of the

mechanisms through which she is to work. So, it may be at the beginning of the study of a selection, or in the middle, or at the end—in Monday's lesson or in Friday's—that all conditions will have become harmonious. Some day, in some recitation of that selection, the moment will come when the key will be turned in the hitherto unused lock, and the mind of the reader will enter into the realm with the writer. The pupil will think! Now, grant that the teacher has worked two days to lead the novice to the door—to find the harmonious conditions for *him*, perhaps to work through fellow pupils' minds more akin to his than hers can be, and has her work almost finished, response in sight, and—the bell rings! Suppose that she has to say, "To-morrow, or for the rest of the week, our lesson is in grammar and composition." What waste of energy, perhaps worse than waste! That moment cannot come again after two or three days; and repetition of that preparation will lack enthusiasm in the teacher's giving, and consequent vitality of production; while, if the teacher could have said, "Think that over to-night, and tell me to-morrow, before we go on reading," the continuity might be kept to fruition.

From my reminiscences of the years' experience, then, I see these three advantages in the different teacher for the literature and the composition classes:

(1) The effect produced upon the pupil by the object-lesson of a different title for the subject of study, strengthened if the personality of the teacher is different.

(2) A higher and less mercenary ideal in the teacher of English, stronger if her choice may be based on her love for English and her appreciation of its power as a factor in honorable living.

(3) A greater surety that the teacher can accomplish her work, if unimpeded, even in the largest and most complex school-systems.

If we could all write *The Junior Essay*, with Miss Coolidge, in the Newton High School, (*Leaflet* 108) or originate an equally successful and attractive method of teaching composition; if, with Mr. Holmes of Worcester Academy (*Leaflet* 106) we might all find the approach to clear thinking in what seems to me a most natural and lasting way, because the pupil himself blazes the trail; if the school, because not in a large system, were not one demanding minutely detailed regulations for text-books, and times; if we might all join in the successful co-operation reported in *Leaflet* 78; if we were all fitted to teach English, either litera-

ture or composition or both, because we chose to teach it, our choice founded in a conception of its infinite possibilities both for material and for spiritual welfare; if such conditions prevailed, then the direction to the teacher might be, only, "TEACH literature and composition—TEACH a love for reading the best of the past and the present, and an ability to express one's self orally and in writing." There would be little necessity of discussing advantages in policy of precedence. Until we have such happy combination of equipments and abilities, we needs must discuss and experiment, being alert always that our reach shall exceed our grasp.

Or, should we be wiser to ponder on Chaucer's counsel?

Tempest thee noght al croked to redresse,
 In trust of hir that turneth as a bal;
 Gret reste stant in litel besinesse;
 And eek be war to sporne agayn an al;
 Stryve noght, as doth the crokke with the wal,
 Daunte thyself, that dauntest otheres drede;
 And trouthe shal deliver, hit is no drede.

—JENNIE I. WARE.

THE DISADVANTAGES OF THE SEPARATION

If I were arguing for my opponent, I should probably claim for the scheme under discussion three advantages:

1. The complicated English course will be simplified by cutting it in two.

2. Firmly adjusted limits and classification of work will tend toward definiteness and away from superficiality; while a certain freshness of interest will attend the pupil who vibrates between two accomplished teachers, studying his Ruskin with the one, his Rhetoric with the other.

3. Specialists and experts will multiply.

Against each of these, my three straw men, blows a contrary wind of doctrine. In the first place, we do not want to simplify our English course. Its complexity is that of a living organism. Our ideal is the brisk reaction between literature study and the pupil's thought; between such stimu-

lated thought and his vital principles; between this enlarged interest in life, and his well-ordered written expression. We strive to transmute the apprehension of the thought of masters into the quickener of larger thought and worthy writing on the part of our students. This connection must be delicate; properly established it is the life of literary growth. Teacher and pupil find the richest possible development when this organic integrity of the work is recognized. Obviously, a formal divorcing of composition and literature will double the difficulty of suggesting to the student the essential relation between them. The mere arbitrary fact of going to separate teachers will crystallize a false distinction.

My second man of straw is not less infirm. Establish a fixed limit between original composition and the reading of literature, and you boycott inspiration. A sane teacher, of course, will attempt a correlation, will do his best to tear down the artificial barricade. Then why erect it? In composition teaching, we need collateral reading as a point of departure. A clever specialist in composition will introduce literature study into his course. Admit that, and my point is established. For certainly most high schools lack time and text books for a double-headed literature-composition-literature department! And as to the student attitude, will not the success of the composition specialist be distinctly hampered by the ancient prejudice which the average unregenerate youth entertains against composition and rhetoric, as the hardest and least alluring branch of his English work? A readier response awaits the teacher who also meets the class in fields of themselves more attractive. The composition teacher, under the proposed plan, will lose the chance to watch his pupils at work over books; the literature teacher will miss much in not carrying his work to its logical outcome. True, the plan will relieve the literature teacher of much drudgery: but Pegasus may profitably plow a bit now and then.

The third advantage claimed for the suggested project is based on the belief that the task of guiding the pupil's written work may wisely be delegated to intensively trained specialists. A wholesome ring has that term *Specialist*, so sweetly compounded with our witching word *Efficiency*! But first you must catch your specialists. Consider, you accomplished teacher of English; shall you seek out the opportunity of making exclusive composition teaching your life-long profession? Is not this very department of our work driv-

ing many valuable teachers from the field? Would it be so easy to find devotees? A certain enthusiasm for such work one can and must sustain; the correlating of rhetoric with realities is exalted business. But most of us undersand William Vaughn Moody's wry-faced prayer that he may *sometimes* get "the shiny taste of themes" out of his mouth. With whatever zeal and relish we approach such teaching, we may well hesitate before assuming a monopoly of it.

In discussing this phase of the question Professor Neilson says: "Here is an occupation which by its nature is very exhausting, demanding a high degree of concentration of attention, and capable of being prosecuted successfully for only a very limited number of hours at a time. It is closely related with another, the teaching of literature, upon which it depends for much of its materials, for all its models, and for the better part of its inspiration. The closest possible association of these two activities would seem to be demanded by common sense."*

Very practically, now, shall we not agree that only artificial allurements—large salary or shortened hours—will be likely to attract very many to the pursuit of permanent composition teaching? Sheer human nature will impel the successful majority toward the literature half of the field; and it seems likely that the newly-proposed specialized positions will be filled by workers who, like readers at college, accept their tasks with weather-eye on ampler fates. We should deplore the relegating of such an important branch of our work to the tyro and the climber, the embryonic and the defunct, with here and there, to be sure, a stray enthusiast who would glorify any system and make it perfect.

Here and there a stray enthusiast! For the sake of fair argument, suppose him secured; a thorough expert, sufficiently in sympathy with the literature teacher to carry over the work adroitly, without interruption; supplying by his vivid personality the lack of intimacy with his pupils which he might have fully if he met them more frequently; supplying by his overflowing literary high spirits the loss of fellowship over books. This teacher, using his rare talent unremittingly, to excess, runs distinct risk of its degeneration. He is in danger of drying up. Too many years of continually outgoing current is deadening. He has, necessarily, derived his creative gusto from his literary taste; his mastery from the touch of the masters. He cannot afford

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to eschew the inspiration of sharing literature study with his pupils; we cannot afford to confine him to any one branch. Such a scholar-teacher should be given the fullest chance to communicate his rare power, in the richest and freest course that literature can compass.

These objections, then, array themselves against the project under discussion. The gulf between original writing and the study of literature will be deepened. Our composition specialist will be far to find. His lot will be unenviable, his growth in grace retarded. Finally, let us not change horses while leaping the gap, particularly if the exchange be to Dobbin from Pegasus.

—FRANCES L. WARNER.

EDITORIAL NOTES

Members of the Association are reminded that we are anxious to cooperate with local centers in arranging English meetings or institutes. A standing committee, of which Mr. Samuel Thurber of the Newton Technical High School is chairman, worked with the local committee at Fitchburg several months ago in carrying out a helpful and interesting meeting there. It is urged that for the general success of the cause of English teaching other centers should now take the initiative in planning for such a meeting soon after the Christmas holidays. Any one interested should write to Mr. Thurber at Newtonville, Mass. for suggestions.

A program of the December meeting of the Association is enclosed with this *Leaflet*. The Executive Committee presents this program with special confidence in its excellence and with special hope that each member of the Association will, in extending general notice of the meeting, urge all his friends to be present. Certainly we are all agreed that the one great idea at the base of the founding and of the perpetuation of schools and colleges is the development of a more stalwart character. In this task—particularly in its more idealistic phases—good literature is the most effective agency. To express again this truth with a new emphasis and to show how the lessons apply to current situations are the chief purposes of the coming meeting. The personnel of the speaking staff is the guarantee of the effectiveness of the message.

As this *Leaflet* goes to press the National Council of Teachers of English is holding its third annual meeting in

Chicago. While we have sent no delegate to the meeting, we have nevertheless expressed to its officers our desire to cooperate in the work of the Council and to further the success of its official organ—*The English Journal*. As the success of both of these enterprises is due in no small measure to Mr. James F. Hosic, the Secretary of the Council and the Editor of the *Journal*, we are glad to take this opportunity to express to him our appreciation of his competent and enthusiastic work.

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